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The Ulster question

The Government's proposal to create a polytechnic in Northern Ireland by amalgamating the New University of Ulster at Coleraine with the Ulster Polytechnic seemed at the end of March a neat, and to a considerable extent a kind, solution to the evident problem of over-provision of higher education in the province which the Chilver committee had identified in a much less neat and much more unkind way.

It avoided the bleak probability that NUU might have to be closed; it offered the apparently interesting experiment of a trans-binary institution; and, most important of all, in most difficult circumstances it provided the basis for some hope in the future. Within the (unacceptably) narrow constraints of the present government's expenditure and higher education policies the merger plan represented at any rate potentially a peace with honour.

Of course, the gap between a peace with honour and a dishonourable surrender has always been perilously narrow. This benign interpretation of the Government's proposal for an NUU-polytechnic amalgamation has been shadowed from the start by another interpretation much less benign. This is that the merger is simply Chilver with a human face, that it will lead inexorably to the same conclusion, first the attenuation and finally the extinction of the Coleraine campus as a significant centre of higher education.

In the days immediately after the publication of the Chilver report and of the Government's cleverly constructed counter-proposal, optimism prevailed. The more immediate threat that the undiluted Chilver recommendations might be accepted had, after all, been lifted. There was the natural relaxation born of relief. Second thoughts at Coleraine seem to have produced a more sombre and pessimistic assessment.

greater the damage to its constituent institutions, and especially to Coleraine.

These two difficulties are linked. The fact that one partner, NUU, believes that it has been dragged into amalgamation makes it certain that the details of amalgamation will be fought over bitterly. If the university could be reassured that the outcome of merger talks was not predetermined, that alternatives existed if the price of a merger appeared to be too high (apart from closure of a course), then detailed negotiations might proceed more smoothly and in a better spirit.

An Ulster polytechnic still looks like the best solution. The Government was right to reject Chilver's recommendations. It would vastly improve the chances of its more liberal alternative being accepted if it rejected Chilver's assumptions.

There is a final and often neglected, consideration. A polytechnic may be the best solution for Northern Irish higher education but is it best for all post-school education in the province? Too little attention seems to have been paid to the possibility that a merger with NUU may distort the peculiar polytechnic mission of the Ulster Polytechnic. Who can tell what will happen when the cord sanitaire of the binary policy is removed?

Then there is the wider question of whether the creation of a dominant, polytechnic partner, of course, by Queen's as a traditional civic university will depress the prospects for further education in Northern Ireland. These important issues seem to have been ignored or brushed over lightly. But they, and the future status of NUU, are the key elements in the debate about the proposed polytechny, a debate that has hardly begun rather than as the Government supposes being almost concluded.

Chance to save face on fees

Almost any Government policy which addressed itself in an intelligent and rational way to the question of overseas student fees would be preferable to the present discredited mix of crude financial expediency and dogma. Even the architects of the full-cost fees policy must recognize by now that the savings produced by the new fee levels have been achieved at an unreasonably high price. The Overseas Students Trust report on an alternative policy provides an opportunity which must not be missed for face-saving second thoughts even at this late date.

The compilation of the report has been used by ministers over recent months as an excuse for inaction on overseas student policy when this was convenient. It has not prevented the Government going ahead with the imposition of health charges; the relaxation of regulations defining a refugee student and departure from the original method of calculating full-cost fees. Now comes the real test of the administration's good faith.

Although the Government did not actually commission Professor Williams' report, it has been involved with the project from the start and has offered all possible cooperation. It was aware of the terms of reference given to Professor Williams and had the trust's book, The Overseas Student Question, as a guide to the likely conclusions. Indeed, there was some scepticism at the outset that the trust, as a creature of big business, was not the ideal organization for a searching review of Government policy as it affected education and so.

There must be doubts, too, about the merits of leaving fee levels at the discretion of institutions. While it is true that costs vary widely and an element of competition could hold fees down, there are objections to leaving education to the vagaries of the marketplace. The packing of courses for financial gain, the possibility of some institutions pricing themselves out of reach of all but the most wealthy, and the likelihood of a damaging price war are all dangers, not to mention the confusion which would be created abroad. The proposed guidelines, designed to preserve academic quality and prevent the diversion of resources meant for home students, are laudable but probably unenforceable.

As Professor Williams concedes at the end of the report, the recommendations are by no means the only possible answers to the overseas student question. Quotes, for example, are dismissed as undesirable and undesirable might be found by working to be preferable at fee levels as the major regulator of numbers. More attention could and should be given to the plight of students from the poorer nations.

But the piecemeal approach of juggling with existing Government spending and acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of overseas student policy probably represents the best hope for progress in the present economic and political circumstances. If it produces a more realistic approach from government and opens the way to further changes in the future, the report can be rated a success whatever reservations there might be about its tone or the detail of its recommendations.

Laurie Taylor



(Women hold only 2 per cent of the highest administrative posts in British Universities. Equal Opportunities Commission Report, June 3)

"Charles. Do come in. Grab a seat. Thanks for popping in. How are things in the bursar's department?"
"Oh, you know, Roger. Ticking over. Ticking over. Roughly I wish to God we knew exactly what the UGC were playing at. I mean Nigel was just telling me this morning that Richard had turned up a couple of very odd estimates in that recent letter."

"Well, not to worry. I expect Tom will be able to sort that one out. Usually does."

"Oh no doubt that it. No doubt at all."

"Actually, Charles, that's not a million miles from the reason I asked you to drop in. I wanted to have a couple of words with you about the possible need for some reorganization in the old finance department now that Michael's moving on to better things. Any problems on the horizon there, d'you think?"

"Not too many, Roger. Not too many. I mean Dennis runs a pretty tight ship and Phillip's always around to keep an eye on more general issues. Mind you with Arthur still on holiday it's bound to be a bit of an ad hoc set-up."

"Exactly. So what we're really looking for here is some sort of new delineation of duties. The type of thing that Robert knocked out when Alastair was number two in the registry."

"That's the thing, Roger. Sort of family tree, with the two branches running down from William and Tony."

"And of course, a pretty watertight indication of responsibilities."

"Oh yes. That's crucial. And obviously that's where we'd need to pull in Alan."

"Quite. Then perhaps the best way forward is to set up a little meeting involving him, and of course you, Peter, Simon and... Robert."

"Robert? Robert Smiles?"

"No, no. Robert Noakes. In his capacity as Maurice's second in command."

"Oh yes. I'm with you there. Yes, definitely bring in Robert."

"Well let's firm that up, shall we? Eleven o'clock tomorrow? Good. And in the meantime we'll get the paperwork together."

The Times Higher Education Supplement

December 24, 1982 No 529 Price 45p

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Insiders may get 'new blood' jobs

Secretary of State for Education told MPs the posts would be "normal university appointments" with their primary role in the early years to contribute to research.

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£13m extra for info technology

Information technology has taken the shape of the extra money found for the education budget this year.

Science Correspondent
Information technology has taken the shape of the extra money found for the education budget this year.

Lords rule on overseas status

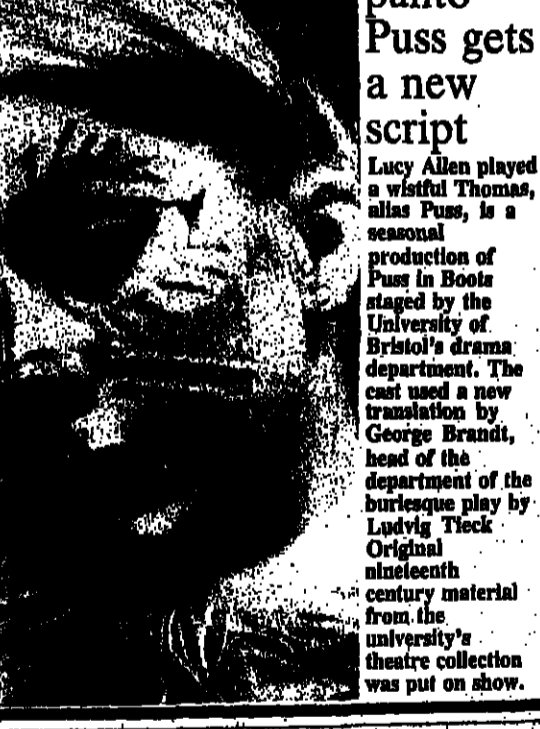
Unlike the lower courts, he ruled that the purpose of residence during the qualifying period was not relevant and could include participation in previous courses.

Target failures get two weeks to toe the line

January 13. Bradford has already told the UGC that it will not be able to reach its target of 3,580 students until 1985/86.

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Ludwig's panto puss gets a new script



House agreement saves Santa

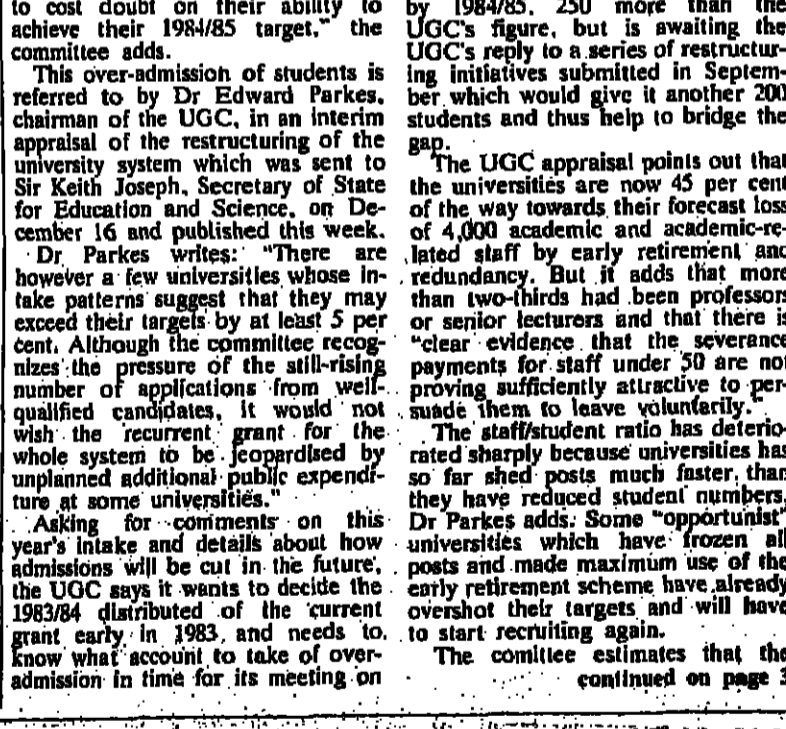
Santa Claus faced more than endless queues of acquiescent infants this week - he was put on trial at Strathclyde University facing charges of house-breaking.

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North American news

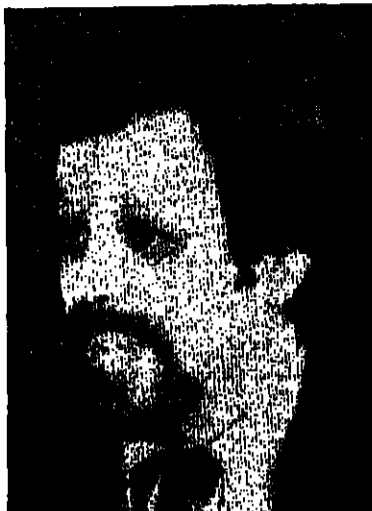
Business and academic work 'don't mix' Director

from Peter David

PHILADELPHIA Academic scientists who become deeply involved with private companies seeking to exploit university-based research should leave their posts, Mr A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University, said last week.

from the university. At the end of the year that person could either return to the university or, if he or she wanted to pursue commercial activities, could leave the university permanently or relinquish tenure and assume "adjunct" status.

Mr Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences, said successful partnerships had been engineered in university-industry projects such as the centre for integrated systems at Stanford and the Monsanto Company's multimillion dollar programme of grants at the Washington University department of medicine.



Giamatti: suggested severe rules

walks into jobs row

by our North American Editor

The director of the United States \$1,000m-a-year National Science Foundation has walked into a political controversy only weeks after President Reagan appointed him.

Overseas news

Einstein's papers reach their promised land

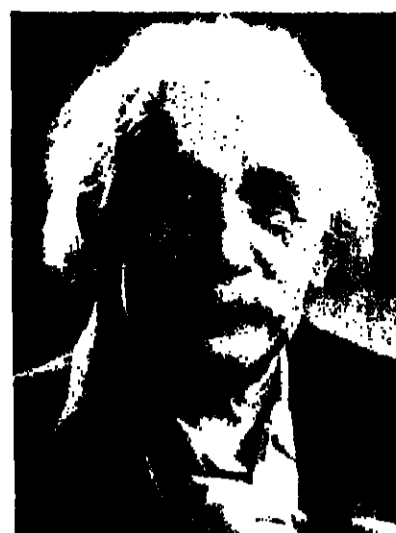
from Benny Morris

JERUSALEM Albert Einstein's papers, in "exile" at Princeton since the physicist died in 1955, have now arrived in Jerusalem and have been deposited in the Jewish National-Hebrew University Library, to which he willed them in 1950.

Mrs Dukas died last January. The Jerusalem university was unhappy about the publication of the papers by Princeton but was unable to prevent it, and has now renewed the contract allowing Princeton to continue their publication. The Hebrew University now holds all copyright to the papers.

At a press conference in Jerusalem Hebrew University president Avraham Harman said that Einstein's will of his papers to the university was "no surprise". As long ago as 1919, Einstein wrote to the library's first director, Professor Hugo Bergman, that he was "committed" to the idea of the HU - which was eventually built and inaugurated in 1925 on Jerusalem's Mount Scopus.

Einstein's revolutionary publication in 1916 on the general theory of relativity. Professor Reuven Yaron, former director of the library and current head of the centre for the history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine, said the papers are an honour and distinction for the university.



Einstein: committed to the Hebrew University.

Autonomy tops new agenda

by Sarah Jane Evans

Universities are at the top of the agenda of Spain's new Minister of Education, Señor Jose Maria Maravall.

she was until 1980 dean of Madrid University's geology faculty. She will be assisted by Emilio Lamo de Espinosa Michelena, who has a sociology PhD from California.

Salvador appeals to academics

by David Jobbins

British academics are being asked to help the beleaguered university of El Salvador to survive despite its two and a half year occupation by the military.

Prescription for improved Cuban health

from Patricia Smith

HAVANA

A group of final year medical students are busy packing their bags for a three and a half year stay in the remote Cuban countryside as part of an experiment to improve health provision and make the Caribbean island a world medical power.

Publishers hit back hard at university

Eight academic publishing firms, frustrated by the widespread photocopying of copyright books and materials, last week launched a legal blitz against New York University.

"Is there enough for the fine yet?"



Corridors of power aid professor

The problems of a little-known professor of Spanish at the University of Maryland intruded unexpectedly into a meeting between Colombian president Betancur and President Reagan two weeks ago during a goodwill tour of Central and South America by the US head of state.

US commerce gives more to education

American businesses boosted the amount of money they gave to education last year despite a significant fall in profits. A survey by the Council for Financial Aid to Education says corporate philanthropy grew 11 per cent to \$1,140m in a year when pretax profits declined 4 per cent.

Part-timers' myth dispelled

from Geoff Maslen

MELBOURNE A study has dispelled the popular myth that the typical Australian part-time student is a middle aged housewife returning to study as her children leave home.

The foreign devil in pop songs

Many Chinese students lack the ability to analyse foreign literary works, films and pop songs, a special seminar on communist education in universities and higher colleges was warned recently.

Greeks upset Slavs over Cyrillic tradition

Yugoslavia is upset by a recent decision by Greece to withdraw students from foreign universities where tuition is given in languages which are not broadly recognized internationally.

Yugoslavia sees this as a specific affront directed against the Kiril i Metodij University in Skopje, where the language of tuition is Macedonian.

Komunist suggested ironically, were Yugoslavians to refuse to recognize the Greek language, though naturally, "we are not prepared for such a stupid gesture".

The translation of the scriptures into a Slavonic language was widely described as Old Bulgarian or Old Macedonian and the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet in which to write it.

Across-the-board cuts 'are biggest threat'

The natural tendency to make spending cuts "across the board" is the greatest danger to the quality of higher education in the 1980s, according to a special policy commission set up a year ago to investigate quality in American universities.

More contentious recommendations, include a call for greater secrecy in the procedures for appointing university presidents. The commission argues that state legislatures should modify their open government "sunshine laws" which result in the premature and sometimes embarrassing disclosure of the names of candidates.

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The making of a skilful workforce

Tom Schuller argues that we need to pay more attention to training

First the insistence on separating the two has been very damaging. It has fostered snobishness and inferiority in the part of educators, and limited the purview of trainers...

Even the good news is bad

John O'Leary discovers that colleges and polytechnics have scant cause for optimism

Table with 4 columns: Institution, Board proposal, DES alternative, Adopted system. Lists various institutions like NE London poly, Middlesex poly, etc.

Even the most optimistic forecasts of increased costs for 1983-84 require the addition of 4 per cent to cash figures now used by the Government...

Paul Flater looks at the history of the Royal College of Music which is celebrating its centenary

It seems strange that the land of Sir Benjamin Britten and The Beatles, Vaughan Williams and Welsh choir, Sir Peter Peers and punk rock, was known as 'das Land ohne musik'...

All that has changed. London, with the Albert and Festival halls, Covent Garden and the Coliseum, is acknowledged as a world capital of music...

A new life for English music



Meeting at St James's Palace on February 28 1882, to establish the Royal College of Music

Such was the concern in Victorian England that Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, set up a Royal Commission...

It might seem invidious to single out the Royal College above the other three London colleges, the equally prestigious Royal Academy of Music, and the Trinity College of Music...

and without any state subsidy. It was a popular cause that attracted widespread support. The press gave the college a warm welcome...

By any standards that is a formidable list, and the RCM can claim a full part in the musical national revival, and an international reputation...

Pool allocation for 1983-4

The table above gives the 1983-4 pool allocations projected by the DES for each of the three main options considered by NAB.

Apathy gives cause for concern

The Business Education Council has just reviewed its general awards. Karen Gold reports on their findings

The most telling statistic, though undoubtedly not the most significant one, in the Business Education Council's first study of its general awards...

credit rate - 85 per cent, compared with the average of 75 per cent - and Greater London the lowest at 65 per cent. Overall, a slight deterioration has occurred since 1978/79...

times, the circumstance 8 n. present time 121 n. time-saving

theology 973 n. higher education education 534 n.

supplement increment 36 n. augment 36 vb. adjunct 40 n. make complete 54 vb.

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NOTICE BOARD

Noticeboard is compiled by Patricia Santinelli and Milla Goldie



This photograph of Henry Moore, taken in 1930, is part of a retrospective exhibition of the sculptor's most important work from between the First and Second World Wars.

Grants

Universities

Glasgow Social and economic research Professor William Lever, £50,000 from the SERC to evaluate policies designed to tackle inner-city problems in Glasgow. Veterinary pharmacology Dr J. A. Bogan, £16,985 from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for the measurement of benzimidazole and their metabolites in animal tissues.

Health Department for morphological and immunopathological studies in clinical and experimental uveiritis, under the direction of Professor W. R. Lee and Dr J. V. Forrester, £30,087 from the Scottish Home and Health Department for an evaluation of the role of C3b receptor in immune complex diseases.

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Table with 2 columns: Appointments and Other classifications. Appointments include Universities, Fellowships, Research and Studentships, Polytechnics, Colleges of Higher Education, etc. Other classifications include Exhibitions, Awards, Conferences and Seminars, etc.

Universities

The London School of Economics and Political Science Is appointing a SECRETARY with overall responsibility to the Director for the administration of the School.

University of West Indies Trinidad Librarian II with administrative responsibilities for the application of a library to the needs of the community.

University of Oxford Central Electricity Generating Board Research Fellowships Applications are invited from scientists and engineers for research in the general area of electricity and its role in the economy.

University of Papua New Guinea Applications are invited for the following posts: Department of Physics LECTURER/ SENIOR LECTURER AND INSTRUMENTATION

University of Oxford GERALD AVERY WAINWRIGHT RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP IN NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY The Board of Management of the Gerald Avery Wainwright Research Fellowship in Near Eastern Archaeology is pleased to announce the appointment of a research fellow to carry out research into the non-religious archaeology of the Near East.

University of Cambridge Department of Physiology SUPERINTENDENT Superintendent of the Department of Physiology from 1 April 1983 or as soon as possible thereafter.

University of Papua New Guinea Applications are invited for the following posts: Department of Economics LECTURER/ SENIOR LECTURER/ ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN ACCOUNTING (3 positions)

University of Papua New Guinea Applications are invited for the following posts: Department of Economics LECTURER/ SENIOR LECTURER IN EXPERIMENTAL PHYSICS

SPECIAL FEATURES FOR 1983. List of features including Business & Technical Education, Microfilm Publishing, Management Education, European Studies, etc.

SPECIAL BOOK NUMBERS FOR 1983

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Feb 11 Biological Sciences
Feb 18 Economics
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Mar 11 Maths & Physics
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 A higher education still produces economic benefits

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 New NSF head sacks three Carter-appointed officers
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 Universities top of agenda for new Spanish minister
 Salvador appeal to British academics
 Australian part-timers are not middle-aged housewives

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Next Week

Review of 1982: an eight-page pull-out
 Charles Peake on James Joyce
 John Eriksson's Soviet dialogue



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More means better?

It is not yet ten years since Mrs Thatcher, then the Secretary of State for Education and Science, and Mr Roy Hattersley, then Labour's spokesman for education, had a long and complex argument about whether expenditure on education had increased more rapidly under Labour between 1964 and 1970 or under the Conservatives between 1970 and 1973.

After starting in the House of Commons in the best "did-didn't" fashion the argument became quite technical with much reference to the relative price effect and other forgotten mysteries from the days when public expenditure was expressed in terms of volume not of cash. Although at the time the outcome seemed to be a draw with Mr Hattersley working hard even for that, the verdict today would probably be that Mrs Thatcher was the winner - as she has continued to be, although this particular victory will probably be given little emphasis in her own record of her achievements.

Mr William Waldegrave is now following in Mrs Thatcher's footsteps (of 1973, that is, not 1982). He is claiming that under the Conservatives more students have been enrolled than ever before, which is certainly true although the causality implied in the claim is a little tricky, and that the proportion of young people going on to higher education is also higher than ever before, which is much more arguable. So far sadly no Labour champion is following in Mr Hattersley's footsteps. It is sad because he would stand a much better chance of scoring a political knock-out than Mr Hattersley ten years ago.

The argument so far. In late November Mr Waldegrave claimed in the House of Commons that the age participation rate, roughly speaking the proportion of young people going on to higher education, for 1981-82 had been recalculated to stand at 13.2 per cent, the "highest ever". We pointed out that according to the Department of Education and Science's own discussion document *Higher Education into the 1990s* the APR was higher than that throughout the early 1970s reaching a peak

of 14.2 per cent in 1972-73 - in the very same winter in which Mrs Thatcher and Mr Hattersley were arguing about who had spent the most money.

Last week we published a letter from Mr Neville Gaffin, the head of information at the DES, which pointed out that Mr Waldegrave was nevertheless correct in his claim because the APRs of the early 1970s had included students on certificate of education courses with five O levels. If these were excluded, the "adjusted" rate for 1972-73 fell by almost two points to 12.3 per cent.

That will hardly do. What is clearly intended as a plea of mitigation can just as easily be seen as proof of condemnation. The APR after all, like all the other indices regularly published by Government, is not a self-sufficient measure but a proxy to indicate the extent of the opportunity to enter higher education. Seen in this context the Gaffin/Waldegrave explanation is in fact an admission that this opportunity has been restricted for those with only O levels.

This is not a party political point. This restriction of opportunity has been as much the work of Labour as of the Conservatives. The last Labour government accepted the exclusion of O level only holders from higher education, and did not manage to make the entry qualification for Diplomas in Higher Education, the effective replacement for certificates, one rather than two A levels as the feeblest of *quid pro quo*. Indeed this is not even a political point. All the evidence suggests that governments were merely following the general will of higher education and of the colleges of education in particular, and of the teaching profession when they excluded such students.

Yet none of this makes the exclusion, so the loss of opportunity, any less real. Nor can Mr Waldegrave rewrite history. Ten years ago 14.2 per cent of 18-year-olds went on to higher education. That is a fact that cannot be altered by retrospective semantic shuffling. If only 12.3 per cent would have been admitted under today's more restricted entry conditions, that tells us much about

our cramped and negative attitude to higher education opportunity in 1982 compared with 1972.

Mr Waldegrave's strange behaviour recently has not been confined to the arid territory of APRs, "recalculated", "adjusted" or just straight. He has more than once praised the polytechnics for rising to the challenge and admitting the extra students that have been squeezed out of the universities. A challenge certainly, but isn't it political rather than heroic in its dimensions? After all, students are being denied places in universities because the Government, of which Mr Waldegrave is a member, has cut the UGC grant; polytechnics and colleges are admitting more students in defiance, if not of Mr Waldegrave, then of the Treasury because expenditure on fees and grants for home students cannot be limited except by limiting the number of students; finally many of these institutions can only admit these extra students because their maintaining local authorities are continuing to supplement their income out of the rates in defiance of Mr Heseltine's Department of the Environment. Incidentally Mr Waldegrave is chairman of the National Advisory Body which in effect is inciting local authorities to continue their defiance.

All very confusing. The trouble is that it is not clear whether Mr Waldegrave is engaged in pre-election opportunism or using an easy-to-break code to suggest that "one-nation" Toryism is still alive in the DES, or a bit of both. Clearly any serious reduction in higher education opportunity is likely to be felt most by the middle classes, and so of electoral concern to the Conservatives. But whether a place in a polytechnic in a northern city will really be seen as an adequate alternative to a place in Oxbridge, or Exeter, or St. Andrews in the eyes of worried Tory parents must be open to doubt. So perhaps we should continue to give Mr Waldegrave the benefit of the doubt and to hope that his views will not follow the same alarming trajectory as Mrs Thatcher's since her argument with Mr Hattersley ten winters ago.

Tenure and collegiality

The Association of University Teachers' winter council in Bradford last week was an uncommonly introspective, at times even dark, occasion. Despite the victory at Aston just two days earlier, few imagined that the troubles facing the AUT and the universities were not still as sombre as the storm clouds outside. Even on tenure - the non-negotiability of which was unanimously and angrily reaffirmed by the council - there seemed to be an unhappy suspicion that, although the set battles at Aberdeen, Aston and so through the alphabet might go on being won, the war might slowly be lost.

For the erosion of the solidarity of the academic profession continues almost unchecked; its tenured core shrinks and its semi-professionalised periphery becomes even more vulnerable. Last week's proposals on "new blood" cannot change that. If lecturers on short-term contracts, part-timers, research workers seemed to exercise less influence at Bradford than at previous councils, that maybe presented a deeply pessimistic and significant paradox: they count for less in the AUT because their position has become more desperate not because it has been eased. Many have left the AUT and joined the dole.

Within the association two resolutions compete for attention. First, a feeling of impotence. After all, if it is so difficult to protect tenure, for those who already enjoy it, how much more difficult to win it for those who

do not. This feeling is the common property of the tenured traditionalist who argues that it is simply not feasible to ask for secure and fairer conditions for those who are in his perspective marginal academics, and of the short-contract researcher who cries angrily: "Of course I would like tenure but I would settle for a proper contract of employment."

Second, a feeling of confusion and even guilt. For the difficult condition of universities and the often desperate condition of contract teachers and researchers raise important dilemmas that cannot be washed away. Which AUT member, in his or her own senate or department, would not argue for a short-term appointment, which might just be granted, rather than a permanent post, which would certainly be refused. Who could criticise such a stand when the effective choice is so often between an insecure job and no job at all? Certainly not the temporary lecturer, or researcher who might gain a few more months of tenure, and opportunity to pursue their profession, by such means. Yet these most difficult choices have to be worked out against a background of staggering inequality with some university lecturers leaving with managing director-scale golden handshakes and others with less than the due of a factory worker.

The tenacity of the AUT's defence of tenure is much misunderstood outside, and even inside, universities. It is easy to display if it is the antique property right that it may in fact be, and so to argue that the bad conditions suffered by the untenured are the price that must be paid for the preservation of the privilege of the tenured. In one sense that is true, but in another profoundly false. For tenure is more than a defence of jobs (indeed it may not be a particularly effective defence). It is more than a defence of academic freedom (most AUT members will never achieve the notoriety that could lead to threats of dismissal, the few that have really unpopular views can probably be sacked anyway, and tenure is no protection against discrimination falling short of dismissal).

Tenure is most of all a symbol of a tradition of collegiality, a pattern of behaviour in universities that may often have been strongly hierarchical and paternalist but is strongly non-industrial. What seems to be under attack when tenure is called into question is a whole university way of life. The growth of insecure academic employment which obliges senior staff to treat their junior staff badly is seen as a threat to the same tradition of collegiality. That tradition may be easy, but it also may be very necessary for sound academic achievement. Certainly those who argue for the revision of tenure need to take it into account. Emotion is as much part of the argument as self-interest. Tenure is not an essential precondition of collegiality, but it is easy to forgive those who think it is.

Laurie Taylor



Darling, does it really matter? Matter! Matter! Are you mad? We've had one every single year before. For fifteen solid years. Well, I can't quite see... Every year. It must have got mislaid.

But darling... Look. Are you absolutely, absolutely, certain that you've looked everywhere?

Everywhere.

Down the back of the stem system?

Twice. And with a torch. He else would I have found that battered Gerry Mulligan LP?

And what about the VCR. Has you checked that?

The video-recorder? That's what I said.

Don't shout. And what do you mean; 'checked it'. Do you think it's got stuffed inside a cassette?

Nuzzled up next to *Mephisto*? Don't be facetious, darling.

I'm not being facetious. I'm simply trying to gently draw your attention to the lunacy of the whole enterprise. If it was here, we'd have found it.

It's not lunacy. I bet you have actually looked right underneath the VCR. Where we keep the instruction booklet.

You did that yourself ten minutes ago. Don't you remember stuffing back that second year essay on structuralism?

Mmmmm. And you're completely positive that its not been accidentally wrapped up with one of the presents?

Darling. You're being totally impossible. We've opened them all twice. It's costing a fortune.

Sellotape.

All of them?

Yes. All. Mother's digital alarm clock; Caroline's Walkman; Timothy's Pakamac.

Pacman.

Yes. That as well.

Just a minute!

Oh my God. What do we do now? Take up the carpet? Dig up the plaster? Dig up the lawn?

The Christmas tree. Under the crepe paper.

We've looked. We've looked. Why not give up? Sit down. Buy a glass of Mother's special wine. I can't believe it. Simply can't believe it.

Listen, my darling. I know that Aston's being praying on your mind but...

But what. But what.

Well...

Well what?

Well, I'm certain there's some other perfectly good reason you haven't had a Christmas from the vice-chancellor.

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